

MACBITER

Breaking off from his bodice-ripper to ponder the future of the Mac OS, MacBiter wonders if Apple's move to Intel could trigger all-out war with Microsoft

His fingers clawed the waistband of her knickers and with a ripping sound the flimsy garment was drawn halfway down her legs. "Cross me, would ye, me pretty?" barked Sir Silas, flourishing his riding crop, and next moment –

Just trying to get your attention. In fact, that's almost certainly the most exciting sentence you're going to read in this magazine, let alone this column, probably ever. And the fact that it has absolutely nothing to do with computers makes no difference. I put it there because if I hadn't, and you'd seen the opening sentence I was originally going to write, you'd have moved rapidly on, probably to a page about Linux. It is my absolute human duty to prevent this and so I confess I invented a book called *Lesbian Flagellators of Dartmoor Prison* and quoted from it. Folk have won Pulitzer Prizes for less.

But now I've got your attention, how can I justify it? Not with any news from Apple, because there is none. There ought to be Apple news – a company the size of Apple should be producing at least one superbly innovative product every 10 seconds – but there isn't. There is news about riots in France, human bombs in Iraq, starvation in some African country on which Bono has not shed the light of his countenance, something going wrong, something else going wrong – in short, the usual psychosis porridge with which we are drip-fed daily by unelected and unnecessary media creeps – but nothing about new Apple products. Considering the time of year, this is very strange.

SNOOZE CONTROL

Don't take me too literally here. It is perfectly possible that since we last met, Apple has upgraded a sparking plug in one of its devices, increased the compression ratio of another and put a go-faster stripe on the latest iPod, all without my noticing. The last time there was a burst of refurbishment, a month ago, I got so excited I fell asleep. I am only surprised that the rest of the industry didn't nod off too, but perhaps they haven't been in it as long as I have.

My point is that nothing, absolutely nothing, Apple can do to its Macintosh range over the next year or so will make the slightest difference to its market share of four per cent, or the way in which Macs are perceived by the digitally aware public. The company is treading water, trying to keep afloat until the Intel lifebuoy drifts within clutching range some time in 2006. Then it figures things will change.

I find it eerie that the serried ranks of industry pundits have all concentrated on whether or not the Move To Intel will enable

buying public – which means you, my dear unadventurous, dull-witted and probably haemorrhoid-infested old friends.

DON'T MENTION THE WAR

Since this scenario is so apocalyptic, nobody wants to talk about it in public. The situation is not unlike that after World War I, when the British and Americans had comprehensive War Staff contingency plans to fight each other, should the need arise. Neither side mentioned these schemes for fear of making them happen.

Whether or not this happens depends on whether you, that section of the public already using Windows, would switch to the Mac OS were a version somehow to wind up on your hard disk. Are you really interested in switching operating systems at this stage of your nerdulence? All your computer-using life you've been aware that the Mac OS is said to be a lot better than Windows, but until now the only way to get it was to buy a Mac, and Macs are dearer than PCs.

But suppose you could have it for 50 quid? Suppose the installation was so painless that all you'd have to do is switch on your peripherals, click OK and wander off for a drink. When you came back everything would be up and running. You probably won't have the nerve, at this stage, to tick the 'Delete all Windows bollocks' box, but this would remain an option on the Help menu.

ENEMY AT THE GATES

At all accounts this is what Bill Gates must fear. The most effective claim-jumper in modern times is about to see a part of his own range fenced off by farmers. Since Windows' emergence as the operating system for what used to be called IBM-compatible computers, its pre-eminence has never been seriously challenged, until now.

But let's be clear: Apple has not said that it intends to mount any such challenge. In fact, Apple execs have denied it vehemently. Well, they would, wouldn't they? But at the same time the lovely Mac OS has been rewritten to run on fast Intel processors, and no matter how much it is dongled or locked down with encryption soup, before long it will be all over the shop, like bird flu. Apple will protest it wasn't its fault – even if it's secretly behind it – but by that time nobody will believe it, certainly not Bill Gates.

I see the clouds of war gathering. Time to get interested in Linux, I think. 



Apple to compete as a hardware vendor with the likes of Dell, HP and co. This has absolutely nothing to do with the real issue, which is whether the Mac OS will prove capable of competing with Windows for the same hard disk space. In other words, will the Move To Intel enable Apple to compete as an operating system vendor with the likes of Microsoft and, er, Microsoft?

The recent brouhaha when some unknown jokers ran the top-secret Intelised version of OS X on a bog-standard PC proves that this is no wild theory. Once Apple is safely aboard the Intel chipset, only its own restraint will prevent it unleashing OS X to the wider PC-

In the same way, you can be quite sure that both Apple and Microsoft have plans to cover the contingency of the Mac OS getting loose amid the planet's network of Intel PCs. Apple's ideal situation would be for the Mac OS to promulgate itself exponentially without this being attributable to Apple itself. It will then attain the result it wants without having to take responsibility or throw down any gauntlet to Microsoft. If Apple does it deliberately by putting the Mac OS-for-Intel on direct sale, it will be open war. Either way Microsoft will fight back. And you can bet it will be nasty, expensive and thoroughly unsporting.

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